

Can the teacher beat the game? Early foreign language learning in formal and informal settings.

Language learning takes place both in informal and formal (often classroom) settings. In order to become proficient in a language, formal teaching must be supplemented with informal learning in everyday settings (Bybee & Hopper, 2001; Ellis, 2002; Ellis & Wulff, 2014). On the other hand, recent research has shown that learners can pick up a lot of new words through informal learning alone (De Wilde, Brysbaert & Eyckmans, 2019).

This study investigates young learners' receptive vocabulary learning in two languages, English and French. The participants are 110 Dutch-speaking children (age 10-12). The children had received approximately 100 hours of formal instruction in French at the time of the study, whereas their contact with English came from out-of-school exposure only.

We looked into the amount and type of exposure to French and English, the children's attitude towards the foreign languages and their language background by means of a questionnaire. The children's receptive vocabulary knowledge was measured with the EVIP-test (French) and PPVT4-test (English).

The findings show that children are exposed to French mainly in the classroom and that there is indeed abundant exposure to English in informal settings. Interestingly, this results in a larger vocabulary size for English than for French prior to any formal teaching in English and after 1.5 years of formal instruction in French. A GLMM-analysis shows that the children's vocabulary learning is influenced by the amount of out-of-school exposure to the target language and the linguistic similarity between the target items and the Dutch translation equivalent. Additionally, English words seem to be easier to learn than French words. The participants' gender and their attitude towards the target language did not have an impact on word learning. The study shows that word learning in informal settings alone can yield better results than formal language learning.

Program summary

This presentation reports on a study investigating children's language learning in two languages, French and English. The children received formal instruction in French whereas contact with English came only from out-of-school exposure. We will look into the children's vocabulary size for both languages and the factors which influence word learning.